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SUBJECT: GUATEMALAN POLITICS FROM AN INDIGENOUS
PERSPECTIVE: MEETING WITH ALVARO POP

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. During a meeting with Embassy, Alvaro Pop, indigenous leader and director of local indigenous NGO NALEB, discussed his research on the indigenous population in Guatemala, the country's socioeconomic development and expectations of indigenous involvement in future elections. Pop conceded that Rigoberta Menchu will not be Guatemala's next president, but asserted that indigenous participation in the political process will only continue to grow and strengthen as a result of Menchu's experience. End summary.

¶2. (U) Poloffs met with Alvaro Pop, an indigenous leader and director of local indigenous NGO NALEB, on July 5 to discuss the political participation of Guatemala's indigenous population. He began by discussing his research for last year's publication of "Porque Estamos Como Estamos," which exposed racism within Guatemala between the ladino and indigenous populations. As a result of his research, he concluded that Guatemalans are radically polarized and said that much of the indigenous population aspires to be "white" in order to gain the socioeconomic benefits, as well as social and cultural acceptance.

¶3. (SBU) Pop believed that the international community had adversely impacted the grassroots movement of development by providing "guilt money." He posited that the country's development should come from within i.e., a "cultivated attitude," and instill a sense of independence "without strings from other countries or organizations." Although he acknowledged that Guatemala had developed in large part due to international assistance, he maintained that the resulting dependence has been more harmful than the benefits.

¶4. (SBU) Pop viewed Rigoberta Menchu's candidacy in this year's presidential race as a catalyst for political change and development in Guatemala, although he acknowledged that Menchu will not win the election. Among the many weaknesses of her campaign, he complained that her party focused only on bridging the "ethnic divide" without a wide platform or national vision to unify the country. He stated that all candidates new to the political process will make mistakes and miscalculations in their campaign strategies, but believed that Menchu was under greater public scrutiny than other presidential candidates. He noted, however, that politics will never be the same in Guatemala, stating that Menchu's progressive pursuit of presidential leadership will be a source of inspiration and hope for future indigenous candidates to also pursue political office. He praised Menchu for creating a new paradigm and making the political process more relevant and more accessible to indigenous youth and women. As a result of Menchu's leadership, he anticipated an increase in political activism among the indigenous and at least two indigenous candidates running for presidential office in 2011.

¶5. (SBU) Finally, Pop contrasted Guatemala with Bolivia in their indigenous participation, praising Bolivia for its indigenous leadership while criticizing Guatemala for its lack of vision or parameters to create a significant political force with indigenous populations. He insisted that it would be a long time before political participation was the norm for the indigenous community in Guatemala because the population had little to no concept of what it means to be part of the political system. However, he said that indigenous leaders were using Menchu's experience as a learning experience and will continue to work with indigenous youth to maintain the momentum after the elections in September in an effort to build a stronger, more politically astute population.

¶6. (SBU) Comment. Pop is a widely respected representative of indigenous political views. His NGO has previously participated in election monitoring and will do so again this year with the help of USG funding. His comments regarding Menchu's candidacy are confirmed by her continued weak standing in the polls. Nonetheless, her presence in this year's race will help set the stage for greater indigenous participation in future elections.
Lindwall